

AN
ESSAY

UPON

ENGLISH TRAGEDY.

WITH

REMARKS upon the Abbe de *Blanc's*
Observations on the ENGLISH STAGE.

By WILLIAM GUTHRIE, *Esq;*



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Printed by T. Walford, at the Green and White,
opposite Temple-Bar, in Fleet-Street.

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E N G L I S H T R A G E D Y.

IT is little above a century since the drama was critically considered. The assemblies formed under the patronage of cardinal Richelieu, and which afterwards improved into an academy, gave encouragement to Corneille. His were the first regular plays, which, perhaps, France, Spain, or Italy, had ever seen since the days of the ancients. He was succeeded by Racine; and to the first of these poets, the French gave the epithet of **SUBLIME**; to the latter, that of **NATURAL**.

THE truth is, nothing can be better conceived than is the distress of Corneille's *Cid*; and Racine wrote several tragedies, of which our middling rate of English Poets need not to be ashamed.

BUT the arts to which those two poets owed their extravagant reputation all over Europe, have been but little attended to; and still continue to debauch, to delude, and to enervate genius. Let us endeavour, if we can, to strip off the imposing ornaments, and to correct the illusive glare.

OF that assembly I have already mentioned, some members were mere poets, and critics; others, though the smaller number, were men of sense and knowledge of the world. These last

were entrusted with the secret of their government's noble design; that of establishing an universal empire, in arts as well as in arms. They therefore availed themselves of the bright side of their poets merits. Critical learning had, some time before, taken its flight to this side of the Alps, and settled in France; and their two favourite poets were conceived to have a sufficiency of elevation, when illustrated by the chaste conduct of their plays, to set them up as the standards of the modern drama; and, in some respects, as superior to the antients themselves.

THIS design was actually carried into execution, by a profusion of ingenious criticisms, dissertations, and essays, concerning the conduct of the drama; especially with regard to the unities of time, place, and character. As the French were authors of those performances, the universality of their language soon poured them into translations, all over the polite parts of Europe; and the ignorant, degenerated, though witty, court of Charles II. encouraged the French drama, almost to idolatry. The fair, the noble, the witty, and the gay, clubbed their endeavours to make Corneille and Racine speak English; nor could even the poor figure, which those authors made in an English translation, cure the ridiculous passion. Pride, or prepossession, continued the delusion which affectation had begun, 'till, with Otway, genius fled, and poetry succeeded.

PARDON this distinction, which has but too successfully been abolished by the French, who never yet produced a poet with one spark of that real fire which animates a true dramatic genius. When prest with this defect they poorly labour to cover it, by the pretence of their attachment to the rules of the stage. But it is mere feebleness. They



They, however, made admirable use of their critical learning; and wrote, or talked, down the invention of Lopez de Vega, and the vein of Calderon, the Spanish poets, with whom the first patrons of their reformed stage could not be unacquainted; but they dreaded a comparison of genius, and gave the subject such a turn, as that no such comparison could be admitted.

I HAVE hitherto confined myself to speak of tragedy, and have avoided all mention of the English stage. My reason for the first is, because I think Moliere is, in comedy, a true genius. But we here see the management of the French. Where no real genius appears, (as they have none in tragedy,) the strict adherence to the rules and purity of the drama covers all defects. But where (as in Moliere) there is great merit, the offences against rules are pardoned; and Moliere is admitted to stand at the head of French comedy, notwithstanding all his lameness in plots, and other defects in his plays.

As to my not mentioning the English stage; we cannot accuse the French of having done it the injustice which they have done to the Spanish and Italian theatres. Their first reformers, and best authors, appear to have been, not only utterly unacquainted with our language, but ignorant that we had any stage excepting what precariously subsisted upon translations from them. We will now, however, consider the mighty merit of French critical learning, when applied to the English stage.

THE rules of the drama are really no discoveries; they are not inventions of which the French can boast. Even the antients themselves owed them to nature, and to their good sense. Their poets gave the examples; and, from those ex-

amples, their critics formed rules. This is a fact easily to be proved. Thus dramatic poetry stands upon the same footing with our noble system of Newtonian philosophy. It is not derived from any hypothesis which experiments are tortured to serve, but the result of repeated effects from certain causes.

LONG before the French had illuminated all Europe with the true rules of the drama, our Johnson knew and practised them to a greater perfection than the most distinguishing academicians ever wrote of them in speculation.—Johnson, at a time when critical learning was as strange in France as in Barbary, did what no Frenchman ever was able to do. He produced regular plays of five acts, complete in the unities of place and characters, and so complete in the unity of time, that they are acted upon the stage in the same time which the same story would have taken up in real life. Where then is the merit of the French critical discoveries when an Englishman has so much the start of their academy, and such advantages in the execution?

BUT Johnson had an understanding which raised him next to genius. He was in the drama what Poussin is in painting. He studied the works of the ancients to so much perfection, that his drawing, though dry, is always correct; and his attitudes, however uncouth, are always just. Hence, whatever he took from living manners, (of which he was sparing) was complete in its kind; while his force of judgment, and observation of proportion, give a warmth, sometimes, to his colouring, as pleasing as when it is the result of nature itself.

PARDON this digression in favour of a poet, whom I admire rather than love: But who is so

unequal* to himself, that when he rambles from that severity which is so peculiar to himself, you cannot find in Johnson the smallest vestige of his merit; so entirely was he supported upon the stilts of close observation of nature, and strict application to study.

EVEN the bird of nature, Shakespear, when he neither soars to elevation, nor sinks to meanness, flies with balanced pinions; he skims the level of dramatic rules; and his *Merry Wives of Windsor* demonstrates how much he acted against his better judgment, when he stretched his wings into the extravagance of popular prepossessions.

THIS last expression brings me to a decisive observation. ---- Persius, applying to moral characters, says, "*Ne te quæsieris extra:*" To the reproachful experience of our own country the reverse is proper, when applied to intellectual characters. It is FROM WITHOUT that we are to seek for the reason of an absurd conduct in many of our English authors, and Shakespear in particular.

BY the expression FROM WITHOUT, I mean the taste of the courts, and the people, to whom the poets wrote; and what it was with regard to the theatre, a short review will exhibit.

WE are to date the revival of classical taste in Italy, and of classical learning in England, from the reign of Henry VIII. That prince affected to be a scholar, and had one quality in common with other tyrants, that he was as severe upon the rivals of his learning, as upon the enemies of his government. The only two men of wit about his court, the earl of Surry and Sir Thomas More, lost their heads upon a scaffold, and had Erasmus been Henry's subject, he probably would have shared

shared in their fate, and in that of Fisher and Cromwell. But as to learning, Henry was an ignorant pedant; it was confined to school divinity; nor do we know that he had the smallest relish for works of wit or genius. Yet during all his reign the people had their *panem et circenses*, "their plays and pastimes." They had their entertainments, not indeed exhibited upon the stage, but in jousts and tournaments, in pageants, in largesses, and in conduits running with wine and hyppocras. When the public is liberally entertained, as they were in Henry's time, with such exhibitions, they soon forget the stage; nay, the feats of arms, and the pomp of pageants dwell so strongly on their minds, that when they are brought to theatrical entertainments, those are the first objects for which they send their eyes abroad.

EDWARD the sixth had but a narrow education; and, by what appears from his puling letters, yet extant, he had the same aversion or indifference as to works of wit as his father had. But the same public entertainments, though more rare, were, in his reign kept up to the people.

DURING the six years gloomy reign of Queen Mary, the passion of the people for pompous exhibitions was redoubled by the great influx of Spaniards, who formed the manners of the court, and encouraged the passion of the public for diversions that were so dear to themselves.

SUCH was the taste of the nation at the accession of Queen Elizabeth, who was a woman of wit as well as sense. But her sex discouraged, and her inclinations disliked, the martial entertainments so lately in vogue. She countenanced the patrons of the drama, and its poets began, though languidly, to rear their heads. Theatrical entertainments,

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ments, however, in the beginning of her reign were but few. But the queen and her maids of honour made a shift to please themselves with the few that were; and among the rest with the play of Palamon and Arcite, in which was introduced a special good imitation of a pack of hounds in full cry.

WHILE the stage was thus over-run with ignorance, impertinence, and the lowest quibble, our immortal Shakespear arose. But supposing him to have produced a commission from that heaven whence he derived his genius, for the reformation of the stage, what could he do in the circumstances he was under? He did all that man, and more than any man but himself, could do. He was obliged, indeed, to strike in with the peoples favourite passion for the clangor of arms, and the MARVELLOUS of exhibition; but he improved, he embellished, he ennobled it. The audience no longer gaped after unmeaning shew. Pomp, when introduced, was attended by poetry, and courage exalted by sentiment. But are we to imagine that Shakespear could reform the taste of the people into chastity? no; they had the full, the wanton, enjoyment of his genius, when irregular; and they were both too uninformed, and too incontinent, to exchange LUXURY for ELEGANCE.

THIS would, undoubtedly, have been the case, even supposing Shakespear to have attempted a reformation of the drama. But I believe he attempted none. His houses were crouded; his applause was full, and his profits were great. His patrons were pleased with the conduct of his plays: Why then should he attempt a reformation, which, with the public, must have been impracticable,

cable, and, to his own interest, might have been detrimental.

BUT, notwithstanding all this, where is the Briton so much of a Frenchman as to prefer the highest stretch of modern improvement to the meanest spark of Shakespear's genius. Yet to our eternal amazement it is true, that for above half a century the poets and the patrons of poetry, in England, abandoned the sterling merit of Shakespear for the tinsel ornaments of the French academy. Let us observe, however, to the honour of our country, that neither the practice of her poets, nor the example of their patrons, could extinguish in the minds of the people, their love for their darling writer. His scenes were still admired, his passions were ever felt; his powerful nature knocked at the breast; fashion could not stifle affection; the British spirit at length prevailed; wits with their patrons were forced to give way to genius; and the plays of Shakespear are now as much crowded as, perhaps, they were in the days of their author.

NOTHING has contributed more to the reproachful, the ignominious, fashion of neglecting Shakespear's manner, than the not understanding aright the character of that pride of human genius. A young gentleman naturally of a fine turn for letters, goes to the university, where the amusements of wit mingle with, nay often lead, his other studies, and one of the first things his tutor tells him is, That all poetry is, or ought to be, an imitation of nature; and he confirms this doctrine by a number of passages from poets, antient and modern. This agrees perfectly well with all the flimsy French dissertations, or English ones stolen from the French, which fall into his pupil's hands upon the subjects of delicacy, taste, correctness,

rectness, AND ALL THAT. When his head is quite warm with their notions, and when he imagines his taste, or something which he takes to be taste, is entirely formed, he applies his rules to Shakespear, and finds many of them not answer. He is soon after turned over to a Swiss or a Scotsman, who LEADS him to travel; and in France he has all his notions of delicacy confirmed and rivetted. He returns to England, where he hears the praises of Shakespear with silent contempt; he tacitly pities every man who loves so unnatural an author, and bursts for an opportunity to discharge his spleen among his French and foreign acquaintances.

IN reality, the gentleman is not to be blamed. He proceeds upon a maxim, which, however true when applied to most other writers, fails in Shakespear.

SHALL I attempt to give the reason of this? It is not Shakespear who speaks the language of nature, but nature rather speaks the language of Shakespear. He is not so much her imitator, as her master, her director, her moulder. Nature is a stranger to objects which Shakespear has rendered natural. Nature never created a Caliban till Shakespear introduced the monster, and we now take him to be nature's composition. Nature never meant that the fairest, the gentlest, the most virtuous of her sex, should fall in love with a rough, blustering, awkward Moor; she never meant that this Moor, in the course of a barbarous jealousy, and, during the commission of a detestable murder, should be the chief object of compassion throughout the play. Yet Shakespear has effected all this; and every sigh that rises, every tear that drops, is prompted by nature.

NATURE

NATURE never designed that a complication of the meanest, the most infamous, the most execrable qualities should form so agreeable a composition, that we think Henry the fifth makes a conquest of himself when he discards Jack Falstaff. Yet Shakespear has struck out this moral contradiction, and reconciled it to nature. There is not a spectator who does not wish to drink a cup of sack with the merry mortal, and who does not in his humour forget, nay, sometimes, love, his vices.

GIVE me leave farther to observe, that beauties have, in Homer and other authors, been magnified into miracles, which, without being noted, are more perfect, more frequent, and better marked in Shakespear, than in Homer himself.

To what extravagance has that father of antient poetry been justly raised, for making so many of his heroes extremely brave, yet assigning to each a different character of courage. But to what perfection has our heaven-instructed Englishman brought this excellency which the French critics are so proud of having discovered in Homer? He has not confined it to courage, but carried it through every quality. His fools are as different from one another as his heroes. But above all, how has he varied guilty ambition in a species so narrow of itself; that it seems impossible to diversify it. For we see Hamlet's father-in-law, Macbeth, King John, and King Richard, all rising to royalty by murdering their kindred kings. Yet what a character has Shakespear affixed to every instance of the same species. Observe the remorse of the Dane, how varied it is from the distraction of the Scot: mark the confusion of John, how different from both; while the

the close, the vigilant, the jealous guilt of Richard is peculiar to himself.

I SHALL now proceed in the review I undertook, that I may at last come to the main design of those pages, which was to prove the different conduct of a great genius and a fine poet, that character which has so long stifled dramatic excellency among us in tragedy.

JAMES the first with much reading had but little knowledge, and with some wit, no taste. His ministers, or rather his favourites, were dunces and rascals, and matters of wit were indifferent to them. They were, however, glad of every occasion to encourage every thing that could divert the public attention from affairs of state, and therefore they did not discourage the stage. They left that entirely to the patronage and management of the people. Hence it is that in all the reign of James the first we find the theatre upon an excellent footing, and, so far as we can judge, furnished with the best set of actors that ever adorned any one nation at any one time. In short, as to the drama, the public rather acquired a better taste than it had under queen Elizabeth. The strength of Shakespear, the regularity of Johnson, the genteel manner of Fletcher, were all encouraged, and each had his just proportion of applause; nor am I sure whether this was not the period in which, take it all in all, England did not see her stage in its highest perfection.

THE court of Charles the first was too stately, too precise, too prudish, to allow the freedoms that prevailed in the last reign, and, among other narrow-hearted reformations, that of the stage took place. For, the king knowing too much and too little to encourage the true drama, wanted to have it so very moral as to be insipid.

Hence

Hence the masques which prevailed so much about this time. They had been in use during the last reign, and, when well executed, they are far from being a tasteless entertainment. The two queen consorts of England, being foreigners, encouraged them as best adapted to speak to the eyes. Under James, they were confined to private parties in the queen's apartments. But Charles, who was a passionate admirer of uniformity, brought almost all the noblemen of his court to affect them, to the infinite prejudice of the stage. But the distractions of this reign soon frightened the people from all public diversions, nor did they recover till the restoration of Charles the second.

THIS monarch had wit and sense. But, having been abroad ever since he attained to manly age, he had no opportunity of cultivating what by nature he certainly was inclined to, I mean the patronage of genius. Having lost the habit, he forgot the inclination; but nature recurred sometimes so strongly upon him, that he was by fits munificent to literary merit. Dryden certainly tasted of his bounty. But in the main Charles was scandalously neglectful of authors, with whose works he was charmed, and to whose wants he was no stranger: witness Butler and Otway. But where he was deficient, his brother, the duke of York, though naturally a frugal heavy prince, supplied with his bounty. Otway was often relieved by him; he almost supported Dryden; and to Wycherly he gave, at one time, fifteen hundred pounds, besides persuading his brother to settle an handsome annuity upon him for travelling abroad with the duke of Monmouth.

BUT the duke of York, from this well-timed liberality, reaped vast political advantages. For during the national combustion against his person
and

and right, he had the stage, then the darling, the only entertainment, of the public, on his side. He had the best writers in the nation to undertake his cause; he had the ablest speakers in parliament to defend his title.

BUT after all, I must not dissemble that there was then a detestable licensing act, which did not expire till after the revolution. This act, however, had little or no force during the hottest fits of the political disputes that then prevailed. The house of commons opposed the duke of York so violently, that the king being too wise to use any stretch of power, every thing against the duke had free vent. Nay the danger in writing was at last thrown upon his side of the question, and l'Esrange was actually, for some time, muzzled by the parliament.

DURING this long æra of wit, the drama still was without correctness. The genius of Otway himself did not cultivate those scenes which it adorned. The patrons of wit were men of little or no taste. They were pleased indifferently with whatever pleased the public. The dedications of poets were addressed, not to merit, but to munificence; while the public itself was so whimsical in its taste, that one fashion of wit scarcely lasted a moon. The poets on the other hand who subsisted on the players and the booksellers, as both these last did upon the public, were obliged to conform to the prevailing taste. Sometimes plays in blank verse were the mode; sometimes in rhyme; one week deep tragedies, another, smutty comedies, and a third, tragi-comedies, prevailed. The poets were ty'd down to the drudgery of fashion; and to fit the players with every sort and size of the commodity in vogue.

B

HENCE

HENCE it is, that we find Dryden, in his admirable prefaces, dedications, and dissertations, veering from point to point of criticism. He had every quality of genius, he had every accomplishment of learning; yet, with those advantages, how little of his dramatic excellency deserves mention. His merits however as a dramatic poet claim we should not forget, that in the story of *Cædipus* he has in that play represented his hero in all the characters which cost the antients so many separate characters to draw; for we see him in Dryden, a king, a lover, a fond husband, and a desperate madman. We are to remember that some passages of his *Anthony and Cleopatra* soften even the graces of *Shakespear*; that his character of *Dorax* in *Don Sebastian* is finely designed; and that the tragical part of his *Spanish Friar* is brought to a catastrophe, at once, noble and natural.---Of what great, of what little, things, was not Dryden capable! If in him the public lost a genius for tragedy, it gained a poet of the first rank in every other province of the muses. But all his failings were owing to the vicious taste of the nation. For after he had shewn what he could do with encouragement, he was compelled to turn all his fine parts to the mercenary drudgery of flattering, and following through right and wrong, dull patrons, and a whimsical public.

LEE was another perished genius of those times. That he had at least dramatical fire is plain from what he wrote. It is likewise certain, that he could both feel and describe distress; qualities, which of themselves ought to give more pleasure than all the faultless regularity, and fine poetry of succeeding tragedies.

WE shall now proceed to the period, (a mighty blank it is,) to the accession of George the second from that of King William, from whence we may date the decay of tragic genius in poetry. I am afraid neither Row nor Addison can wipe that reproach from this period. But what it then lost in one branch of the drama it gained in another. For England then saw her comic scene brought to perfection. To such perfection, that nature in giving it seems to have exhausted her stock of dramatic talents. The same encouragement was then given to tragedy, but the public had not the same taste for the one species as for the other. The dispute between the antients and the moderns, which in itself was idle and immaterial, came over from France and infected our great men, who most of them either had wit, or were its profest patrons. The favourers of French poetry then crawled out, and in that summer of their days, under the pretext of CORRECTNESS helped to extinguish SPIRIT. The cry against the popular taste of poetry during the late reigns, became now more and more in fashion. Ministers took up the pen to ridicule Dryden, statesmen employed their talents to recommend the academy. England became a party in a French dispute. France by her arts avenged herself of our arms; our men of wit admitted her to be an arbiter, without seeming once to reflect that England had produced a Shakespear, a name which must have been decisive in the dispute, and which ought to strike dumb all advocates for any other superiority in the province of the drama.

POWER is decisive in wit as in politics, when, like the ministers of king William and queen Anne, it is munificent and affable, and encourages

what it loves. Correctness was now all the mode. I shall confine myself to the influence which this had upon tragedy alone.

It is within the compass of almost every writer's abilities to be correct. He who has no other perfection may attain to that; and it must be owned, in those days to have covered a multitude of faults. To exemplify this in our modern tragedies would be endless. Its effect was, that correctness was first looked upon to supply the place of poetry, and then poetry that of genius. Correctness without spirit is a distinction understood by every body, but that of poetry without genius, is what I am now bound to establish.

THE first thing then a poet does, after he gets the subject of a tragedy, is to form his characters and then his conduct. He next makes a kind of a prose anatomy of his play, and then he sits down to give it expression, the flesh and blood of his performance. But in what follows the genius and the poet differ, and here we shall take them both up.

THE genius forgetting that he is a poet wraps himself up in the person he designs; he becomes him; he says neither more nor less than such a person, if alive and in the same circumstances, would say; he breathes his soul; he catches his fire; he flames with his resentments. The rapid whirl of imagination absorbs every sensation; it informs his looks; it directs his motions. Like Michael Angelo, who, when carving any great design, wrought with an enthusiasm, and made the fragments of the marble fly round him, he is no longer himself; he flies from representation to reality;

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reality ; with * Shakespear, he treads the sacred ground ; he surveys the awful dome ; he does not describe, but converse, with the stalking ghost, and the lawrelled dead ; the hallowed vaults re-echo his steps, and the solemn arches repeat his sounds.

THE genius that is not so staunch as not to ramble after the most inviting pursuit, after the finest sentiment, that springs in the field of fancy, sinks into poetry. A great genius never can be diverted from its immediate object. It does not perhaps keep up the same intenseness in all the under characters of the same play. But that is immaterial. It is sufficient if one or two characters, at most, in a play, are thus worked up ; nor is it one of the least faults of our modern drama that the manners of the under characters are marked too strongly. The practice of the ancients, and a greater authority than the ancients, that of Shakespear, was otherwise. Among the Greeks, their *Œdipus*, their *Iphigenia*, their *Philoctetes*, in their several plays, fill up all the measure of distress, and employ all the force of attention. Shakespear has indeed in one play very strongly marked one under character, I mean that of *Iago* in *Othello* ; but the high finishing of the principal one required it, and none but a genius like Shakespear could have executed such a plan. In *Julius Cæsar*, the chief character, which I take to be that of *Brutus*, is drawn to his hand in history, as is that of *Cassius* ; and therefore he had less difficulty in executing them to such high perfection. But this conduct, easy as it was to

* Alluding to the known tradition that Shakespear shut himself up all night in Westminster-Abbey when he wrote the scene of the ghost in *Hamlet*.

Shakespear, obliged him to throw the greatest character that ever nature formed into an under part. The figure which Cæsar makes in that play, is that of formal, empty pomp; and we see the poet has rid his hands of him as soon as he could, that he might have the more leisure to attend his favourite Brutus.

THIS leads me to observe, though I have the prepossession of a whole age against me, that there is not the least necessity for the chief personage in a play to have either courage, wisdom, virtue, passion, or any other quality, above what is to be found in his real history, or in common life. It is a sign of a poverty in genius when a poet invents a dress of good or bad qualities for a favourite character. The antients always brought the same men upon the stage, which they saw in the world. But the French and the modern English in their tragedies have peopled the poetic world with a race of mortals unknown to life. This aiming at super-eminent qualities, where there no other, is a proof of the defect of genius; but the eternal practice of the French has, in modern times, given it a shameful sanction.

THE field of imagination lyes higher than that of truth, and our modern poets generally take advantage of the ground to mount their Pegasus. But Shakespear, like his own winged Mercury, vaults from the level soil into his seat.

He has supported the character of Hamlet entirely by the force of sentiment, without giving him any of those strong markings, which commonly form the chief modern personage in a tragedy. He has not even made use of those advantages, with which the great historian from whom he took his subject might have furnished

nished him. He has omitted part of the marvellous to be met with in that writer, but has made excellent use of the following beautiful description of Hamlet's madness. *Falsitatis, says Saxo, Enim (Hamlethus) alienus haberi cupidus ita astutiam veriloquio permiscebat, ut nec dictis veracitas deesset nec acuminis modus verorum judicio proderetur.* "For Hamlet abhorring the imputation of a lye, so mingled cunning with truth, that what he said was neither void of veracity, nor could the measure of his wit be betrayed by the discoveries of his sincerity." Where is the poet but Shakespear, who could have worked so insipid a character into life by the justness of reflection, and the strength of nature, without applying those colours, which an inferior genius must have used to mark a principal figure *. All that we see in Hamlet is a well-meaning, sensible, young man, but full of doubts and perplexities even after his resolution is fixed. In this character there is nothing but what is common with the rest of mankind; he has no marking, no colouring, but its beautiful drawing, perhaps, cost Shakespear more than any one figure he ever attempted.

In like manner Macbeth is the same in Shakespear as in Boethius and Buchanan. The poet keeps to the historian's fable and characters. *Animus etiam Macbethi, says the history, per se fe-*

* It may be some satisfaction to the reader to know that Shakespear has taken from the Danish history the whole of Hamlet's disguised madness; the friendship betwixt him and Horatio who was his foster-brother, the scene with his mother; the death of Polonius; his banishment into England; his return, and his killing the usurper. The story of the ghost was either Shakespear's invention, or, as I am inclined to believe, he had it from the songs of Danish bards which was all the history that people had before Saxo and Snorro wrote.

rox, prope quotidianis conviciis uxoris (quæ omnium confiliorum ei erat conscia) stimulabatur
 “ For Macbeth, of himself impatient, was spurred
 “ on by the almost daily reproaches of his wife, his
 “ bosom counsellor in all his designs.” How nobly
 has Shakespear improved this hint! how finished
 are his characters of this wicked pair! and how
 artfully has he conducted and described the human
 heart through every stage of guilt, rising
 and reluctant in the man, ready and remorseless
 in the woman.

IN one of the two plays wrote by the other genius of England for tragedy, I mean the Orphan, the characters, like the fable, are not raised above the level of common life. Distressed innocence is all that marks Monimia. Her brother, though a favourite part in the play-house, has nothing about him but what any other gentleman of the army ought to possess. In Otway's other tragedy, Venice Preserved, the parts of Pierre and Jaffier, and the distress of Belvidera are indeed strongly marked, but the effects their characters produce are owing to the poet's admirable application to the experience of mankind in common life, beyond which the distress of his fable does not rise; and in bringing the woes which the guilty suffered, home to the breast of the innocent.

HAVING thus endeavoured to explain what I mean by a genius in tragedy, I shall now proceed to the description of a poet; and, if you will, a fine poet, and take him where I dropt him, when he begins to colour, and to draw his characters.

HE does not so much consult what a character would say were he in the poet's place, as what he would say were he in the place of the character. He does not consider so much, how things may be
 pro-

properly, as how they may be finely, said. His heroes and his princesses all speak his language, that is, the language of poetry without passion. He never touches upon an effect without describing the cause; he never starts a sentiment, but instead of considering, how the character, were it real, would express it, he consults how Virgil, Lucan, Seneca, or any great antient or modern author would turn it. He then launches out into their beauties, and gives it all their embellishments.

BUT above all things, he is excessively fond of definitions; no great quality comes athwart his dialogue, that we have not anatomised, and its rise and progress accounted for. He is very much enamoured when his characters are virtuous, with virtue in all her shapes; he takes occasion to recommend her from the mouth either of his hero, or some of his friends. But the misfortune is, he is extremely apt to overdo. His characters of this kind are all so very virtuous, so very brave, so very loving, and so very constant, that they exclude all failing, and all propensity to guilt, which, I will venture to say, ought to attend the most complete dramatic character, and are the true springs which captivate, engage, move, and animate the passions.

WERE a modern poet to express that simple, yet fine sentiment of Otway,

“O I could love thee, ev’n in madness love thee!”

how would he disdain the baldness of the expression! how would he dissect and define, first, the lady’s worthiness to the object of love, then love itself! and ten to one but he would even step into Bedlam, that he might entertain us with a
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more lively picture of madness and its symptoms. Were he to express the horrors of the lady Macbeth, how would he smile supposing he had never read the play, if he were told it could be done beyond what ever poet executed, or imagination conceived, only by rubbing the back of her hand, and repeating a deal of wild stuff in her sleep! With him all must be great, all must be philosophy, all must be poetry.

I CANNOT prove the truth of this observation better than by the example of a great poet, to which character he joined as true a judgment, and as much critical knowledge as any man ever possessed; I mean Mr. Addison. That author has, to the immortal credit of his name and nation, exhibited upon the stage a Cato; but we must take the liberty to observe that he is not the Cato whom Rome produced, or Shakespear would have drawn: he is so firm in virtue, so fortified in philosophy, that he is above the reach of fate, and consequently he can be no object of compassion, one great end of tragedy. The poet seems to be aware of this, and endeavours to raise compassion in circumstances, wherein he ought of all things to have avoided such an attempt, in drawing the character of a professed stoic. With such, the cause of virtue gave supreme happiness, whatever was its success. The friends of the family of Cato therefore could never in the eyes of a stoic, be touched with misery, while embarked in such a cause. These, I imagine, were the real sentiments of Cato, as his illustrious contemporaries have drawn him; and if I mistake not, Shakespear, without any other regard, would have attached himself to that character only, and have made Cato from an enthusiasm of public spirit, like the first Brutus,

do something extremely shocking to natural affection, and to those private passions which ever mingle with the human frame, and oppose the force of nature to that of philosophy. This tremendous virtue formed the real character of Cato; and we find in fact the commands of the senate, in the business of Cyprus, engaged him to accept of a mean, mercenary, inhuman commission.

THE under characters of that admirable play are all of them highly finished, and each is fit for the qualities it possesses to stand as the head character in any other tragedy. But they stand in this play as yews did in our old gardens, each regularly opposing the other; and this perhaps was one of the means which pleased the gentlemen of taste at the time it was wrote. The cool, the steady, the reserved virtue of Portius, is opposed to the noble, the sincere, the open manner of Marcus. The generous, humane, disinterested principles of Juba, contrast the dark, designing, treacherous qualities of Syphax. The softness, and candour of Lucius, are designed to raise our hatred for the impetuous dissimulation of Sempronius. All is indeed extremely well executed, and all bears the mark of a fine poet, but not of a great genius.

FOR a particular instance of the difference betwixt the poet and the genius, let us go to two speeches upon the very same subject by those two authors; I mean the two famous soliloquies of Cato and Hamlet. The speech of the first is that of a scholar, a philosopher, and a man of virtue: all the sentiments of such a speech are to be acquired by instruction, by reading, by conversation; Cato talks the language of the porch and academy. Hamlet, on the other hand, speaks that

that of the human heart, ready to enter upon a deep, a dreadful, a decisive act. His is the real language of mankind, of its highest to its lowest order; from the king to the cottager; from the philosopher to the peasant. It is a language which a man may speak without learning; yet no learning can improve, nor philosophy mend it. This cannot be said of Cato's speech. It is dictated from the head rather than the heart; by courage rather than nature. It is the speech of pre-determined resolution, and not of human infirmity; it is the language of uncertainty, not of perturbation; it is the language of doubting; but of such doubts, as the speaker is prepared to cut asunder if he cannot resolve them. The words of Cato are not like those of Hamlet, the emanations of the soul; they are therefore improper for a soliloquy, where the discourse is supposed to be held with the heart, that fountain of truth. Cato seems instructed as to all he doubts: while irresolute, he appears determined; and bespeaks his quarters, while he questions whether there is lodging. How different from this is the conduct of Shakespear on the same occasion!

IF from this light sketch it should appear, that the difference I have laboured to establish betwixt a poet and a genius, is justified by the practice of our greatest modern authority, how many strong proofs might be brought from the works of authors either less deserving, or less celebrated.

THE rules of architecture, of painting, and of poetry, are in one respect all founded upon the same principle. There should be one great object, and that object under no disadvantage from the vicinity, the multiplication, or the resemblance, or ornaments of inferior members. We see the effect

effect which this has upon the majestic simplicity of building ; we perceive it in the happy disposition of painting ; and shall we be insensible of it in the conduct of the drama ? Yet the constant practice of the antients has not yet instructed us. The French with all their pretended refinements have left the stage in this respect as gothic as they found it.

NOTHING encourages bad taste either in the authors or the judges of the drama, so effectually, as does pride. When we want to draw a character we resort to models of greatness ; to the camp, to the court, to pageants of honour, to scenes of grandeur. There, the language of the world drowns the whispers of the heart ; there, the distress which rises, is not that of a man but of a hero ; the elevation is that of state, but not of sentiment. Were an *Œdipus* with us to lose his eyes, we would make him brave his fate, and superior to his misfortune, instead of making him with *Sophocles* bewail his misery in agonies of nature.

OTWAY succeeded by conversing with the heart alone ; and *Shakespear* was the constant companion of nature wherever she resided : yet I am not afraid to say, that when either *Shakespear* or *Otway* turned to other objects, that is, when they commenced poets, they make but a sorry figure. The verses of *Otway*, had he been author of nothing else, might, perhaps, have intitled him to a state worse than that of oblivion. Neither am I afraid to question, whether the greatest of our modern poets, and, perhaps, a poet, whose superior, antiquity never saw, and whose equal, posterity must not expect ; I say, had even *Mr. Pope* attempted to write a tragedy, he must have made a figure in the drama, in which,
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to say the best of it, we never could have discerned the author of the ethic epistles. There are few of our late poets (for I speak not of the living) who have not attempted to shine in tragedy, but with how little success we have already examined. Were the principal speeches of their plays to be cut out, they might pass for excellent blank verse poems on such and such subjects. But with Shakespear as with Homer, every speech is made for the character, and not the character for the sake of the speech; nor can any sentiment be pronounced but by the character that speaks it: None of the least proofs of a great genius, and the strongest indication how intensely and how abstractedly he studied.

BUT after all I have said, I am far from denying the great beauty of chastity in the drama. The unities are now, perhaps, inseparable to its merits, and they are so easily practised, that we could not readily forgive even the greatest genius who should neglect them. But is this chastity to atone for coldness? Is good sense to take the place of great sentiment, or poetry to banish passion.

I cannot take my leave of this subject, without remarking in general upon the observations which the French have made as to our stage, and as to Shakespear particularly. An author whose letters are published, under the name of M. Abbe le Blanc, and which have met with a favourable reception, leads me to detain you longer than I intended.

THE abbot in his letters resembles our modern poets in their plays; he is a very good writer, but a very ignorant informer: He says to his correspondent, when speaking of Shakespear, "Some pas-

“ passages of this poet translated into our language, cannot but give the highest idea of his merit.” For my own part, I doubt extremely of this fact; or whether, when Shakespear is translated into another language, our ideas of his merit can be raised much above those of the best French tragedies; so peculiarly immediate is the connection betwixt his language and his sentiments. But how does this ingenious Frenchman justify what he has asserted? He gives us a scene; in two thirds of which, all the sentiment, all the character, all the spirit of Shakespear is crippled by miserable rhyme. Could the Frenchman pretend to be a critic of the English taste, and yet be ignorant that there is not in all the works of Shakespear, or any other English poet, one rhyming scene in tragedy, which is read, far less admired, by even the most indifferent judges in England.

THE abbot, next with an oblique reflection, gives us the scene of Beauford upon his death-bed, which, he says, rises almost to horror by the truth it contains; but had the abbot been acquainted with the history of England, he would have given Shakespear the praise of thus ennobling a single fact in history, and giving such strong dramatic characters, as are those of the king and the cardinal on this occasion, without rising one tittle above the level of their true histories. This is what no genius but Shakespear ever could do. Notwithstanding the high finishing of all his chief historical characters, there is not a feature, there is not a colour, there is not a manner, nor a passion added, which they had not in life. So well could Shakespear improve without altering nature.

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WHAT I have said of his great characters, are equally applicable to his mean ones, such as those introduced in the scene which the abbot next gives us of Cade and his rabble. Ignorant and barbarously whimsical as they seem in Shakespear's scene, they are not more so than they are in the historian's page. Though Shakespear has had the art to make all such characters superlatively detestable, yet has he not added one circumstance, or exaggerated it, beyond what he found in our annals. The abbot therefore is mistaken in giving us this scene as a specimen of Shakespear's comic. It is, in effect, a specimen of the tragic as carried by the lowest, the most ignorant, the most infamous of mankind. Was Shakespear to write now, his conduct in introducing such personages would be inexcusable; but at the time he did write, it was, perhaps, proper. He wrote to a people that even but a few years before, had in fact given him the subject; nor was Shakespear dead many years before they lived over all his scenes of civil rage, and acted in the world what he described in his theatre. His representing such a people, in the strongest, the most ridiculous, the most odious colours, could not therefore but have the best effects upon his audience, and upon the public.

THE same abbot in his 73d letter, as another specimen of Shakespear's genius, gives an extract from Titus Andronicus, a play falsely attributed to Shakespear, or, if his, so justly condemned by all men of taste in England, that it can be no specimen of the English taste. But the abbot is representing the English nation as they are at present, and has been sufficiently

ently informed, he would not have given the defects of the dead Shakespear as instances of taste in the living English. He would have mentioned that the English in general, who have eyes either to see or read a play, are as much shocked with, and as much condemn, the faults of, Shakespear; nay are as much quick-sighted to them as any Academician in France can be.

BUT after all, I am not quite sure, whether the French or the Englishman would agree together on the passages to be condemned. What the Frenchman may call low stuff and buffoonery from his ignorance of past English manners, perhaps the Englishman may, with much better reason, defend as fine wit, and true humour. Nay, I will go farther, by supposing, what I believe, that an Englishman under King George, and one under Queen Elizabeth, could it be possible for them to hold conversation together, would have very opposite sentiments, with regard to what is called Shakespear's low wit.

IN the performance which the abbot gives us, called the supplement of genius, and which is supposed to be writ by an English wit, the criticisms are all trite and obvious, and deserve no consideration, because those which are just, are universally known and approved of by the English nation. Therefore this performance, whether the work of an Englishman or a Frenchman, gives us as little idea of the present taste in the English, as of real beauties in Shakespear: But perhaps, even in criticism as founded both on truth and the practice of the antients, we may in many things differ widely both from the abbot

and his author. The practice of one stage, the French for instance, ought never to be the rule for that of another. To lash the vices or expose the follies of mankind, ought in truth to be the ends of the drama, and where the vices or follies of one nation differ from those of another, the remedies must differ likewise. But a Frenchman can have no idea of the remedy, because he is ignorant of the disease.

As to the practice of the antients, one may venture to enter the lists with any academician, and be judged by any of his body who understands Greek, whether he does not in the best comedy of Aristophanes produce a greater number of more execrable puns, more indecent expressions, and lower trifling, than there is in the worst play of Shakespear.

THE Abbe in his 39th letter has the following passage: "Before the battle of Philippi, says he, is fought, there is a parley betwixt Brutus and Cassius on one side, and Octavius and Anthony on the other. By the grossness of the abusive language they give each other at this interview, one can't take them for Romans." This observation is far from partaking of the abbe's usual candor. It is not the want of information that can bring him into so capital a blunder as to imagine that there is in all the system of modern ribaldry, any sort of words or phrases too coarse for the politest of the Romans to use, not only in private altercations but in their most awful and decent debates. This is a character stamped upon that people by their own historians; and the thing is liberally practised by their orators. Salust, the finest gentleman in Rome abuses Cæsar in the most gross terms; and Cicero, the fountain of elo-

eloquence and address, has, in the open senate, at the bar, and from the rostrum, discharged against the greatest men in Rome, torrents of abuse, which would pollute the stile even of our Billingsgate.

I CANNOT have a fairer opportunity, than this presents, for observing how strongly national prepossessions operate upon judgment. The abbe could have no notion that heroes could ever fall a scolding. Had they run one another through, provided it had not been upon the stage, they had acted very decently. But the Romans, who were at least as brave and as sensible a people as the French are, thought otherwise. They employed their tongues upon one another, and their swords upon their enemies. Hence it is that in all the glorious period of their history, though we meet with many scolding bouts amongst their heroes, we don't meet with one duel. Shakespear seems to have been perfectly sensible of this characteristic of that great people; and though in the fine scene betwixt Brutus and Cassius, our players have ever made a feint towards a duel or rencounter, yet nothing could be more opposite to the poet's meaning; it is not encouraged by one syllable of the discourse, and in effect it destroys the cool steady temper which our author, to the honour of his judgment, has made Brutus preserve.

I HAVE thought proper to throw out those animadversions upon the abbe, whom I take to be an ingenious writer. But I cannot in justice to the public help saying, that in what regards the English stage he is absolutely misinformed. His judgment of our poets and actors are equally trite and absurd, and it is
amazing

amazing that a person who observes so well should know so little. If my time permitted I could undertake to prove this in many of the abbe's other remarks upon the English nation. What I have done in the above lines fell in with my subject, and is a justice due to the character of the greatest genius nature ever produced.

positions operate upon the mind, and I have no doubt that the abbe's remarks could have been made in a more judicious manner through a lessing. I had they not been upon the stage, they provided it had not been upon the stage, they had acted very differently.

THE INTELLECTUAL ROMANS, who were as least as brave and as capable a people as the French are, thought otherwise. They employed their tongues upon one another, and their words upon their enemies. Hence it is that in all the glorious period of their history, though we meet with many scolding scenes amongst their heroes, we don't meet with one that is a scold.

It seems to me that the abbe's remarks are in the fine line of the players in the theatre, who are to be rewarded by one of the most illustrious of the British nation in the cool steady temper which our nation, to the honour of his judgment, has made famous for ever.

I have thought proper to show the whole and not a part upon the abbe, which I take to be an ingenious writer. But I cannot in justice to the public help saying that in what regards the English stage it is absolutely uninstructive. His judgment of our poets and actors are equally and ably, and it is amazing



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